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ABSTRACT

One of the major changes in educational practices occurred during the Italian Renaissance, when a system of pre-university education based on a thorough grounding in the Latin, and to a lesser extent, the Greek classics began. This change started in early 15th century northern Italy and lasted until well into the 20th century. Italian school children of the 14th century followed a normative medieval curriculum which consisted of reading such medieval authors as Donatus, Cato, and Theodulus. Although classical authors were taught along with medieval textbooks, they did not dominate. The early humanist scholars stressed the purpose and promise of humanistic education. Foremost among these scholars was Guarino Guarini of Verona (1374-1460). A handful of pedagogical pioneers won the support of a few political leaders who sponsored their local schools in a small region of northern Italy. Cicero's works became the most important texts in humanistic schools. By 1490 or 1500 the humanistic curriculum must have been universal in Italian schools. Humanistic studies then spread to northern Europe. (PPB)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMANISTIC CURRICULUM IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

By Paul F. Grendler

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMANISTIC CURRICULUM IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

Paul F. Grendler

Education resists change so successfully that in the three millenia since the Greeks civilized themselves, the western world has witnessed only a handful of educational revolutions. One occurred during the Italian Renaissance, when the system of pre-university education based on a thorough grounding in the Latin and, to a lesser extent, the Greek classics began. As a result of the efforts of the Italian humanists and the northern humanists who followed, a system based on the *studia humanitatis* trained boys and a few girls in eloquence and wisdom. A Latin and Greek education based on the classics became the norm for the children of the elite, and those from the middle class who hoped to rise, in fifteenth-century Italy and the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century. The humanist educators did their work so well that classical education lasted until well into the twentieth century. Not until after World War II---in Italy not until 1968---was it possible for a European or North American to escape the rigors of a classical education if he wished to attend university and take his place among society's elite. Since it has now pretty well disappeared, we tend to forget how revolutionary was the educational change that occurred between the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Of course, every Renaissance scholar will cheerfully admit that the revolution was not total. And if he forgets, medievalists will forcefully remind him of the con-

tinuity between Middle Ages and Renaissance. Nevertheless, a major change did occur, and that is the subject of this paper.[1]

A brief summary of education before the advent of the *studia humanitatis* helps to pinpoint the changes. Fourteenth-century Italian school children followed a normative medieval curriculum which consisted of reading medieval curriculum authors. They were *Donatus*, *Cato*, *Liber Aesopi*, *Eva Columba*, *Theodulus*, the *Doctrinale*, the *Catholicon*, and so on.[2] All attempted to teach Latin grammar and good morality. Students also read portions of a few ancient poetic authors as Vergil, Lucan, Ovid, and Statius. They learned to write formal letters according to the principles of *ars dictaminis*.[3]

An example will make the point. In 1386 the Commune of Chioggia (near Venice) hired a new communal or public school master. As usual, the commune permitted him to charge his stu-

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1 This paper discusses one aspect of Renaissance education. It is based on chapter 5 of my *Schooling in Renaissance Italy. Literacy and Learning 1300-1600* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). Because this paper is not intended for publication, documentation has been considerably abbreviated and is mostly limited to primary sources.

2 The list of *auctores* is a composite of several such lists drafted by medieval authors and noted in Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1963), pp. 42-45, 48-54, 260-264. See also the lists in Eugenio Garin ed., *Il pensiero pedagogico dell'umanesimo* (Florence, 1958), pp. 91-103.

3 On *ars dictaminis*, see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages. A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA, 1974), esp. 194-268; and Ronald Witt, "Medieval *Ars Dictaminis* and the Beginning of Humanism: A New Construction of the Problem," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 35 (1982), 1-35.

dents supplementary fees on a graduated schedule based on the texts taught. This fee schedule lists the classroom texts. After the lowest level of elementary Latin grammar came *Aesopus*, *Prospero*, Ovid's *Heroidum Epistulae*, and Boethius. Students at a higher level studied "Vergil, Lucan, Terence, and similar poets and authors."[4] This schedule tells us that some late fourteenth-century pedagogues taught certain classics or parts of them. But the curriculum made no distinction between the classics and medieval textbooks, between Vergil and *Prospero*. Classical authors did not dominate; indeed, ancient prose works were little taught.

Disastisfied with the medieval curriculum, the early humanists attacked the medieval curriculum authors. Petrarch started it: "In my childhood when all the others gaped at *Prospero* or *Aesopus*, I pondered the books of Cicero."[5] (This was probably not a true picture of his juvenile reading, but an expression of Petrarch's adult views.) Lorenzo Valla savagely condemned the medieval curriculum textbooks. At great price they

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4 "et volentibus audire tragedias, virgilium, lucanum, terentium, et similles (sic) poetas et auctores ultra esopum, prosperum, ovidium heroicum et boetium duc. IJ in anno pro quolibet." The contract is printed in Vincenzo Bellemo, "L'insegnamento e la cultura in Chioggia fino al secolo XV," *Archivio veneto*, N.S., Anno 18, Tomo 36 (1888), p. 49.

5 "Ab ipsa pueritia, quando ceteri omnes aut Prospero inhiant aut Esopo, ego libris Ciceronis incubui." *Senili*, XV, 1, as quoted in Garin ed., *Il pensiero pedagogico*, p. 91.

teach ignorance. Indeed, those who go to school and read these books become more stupid than those who stay home, he wrote.[6]

The next step was to offer a new vision in place of the discredited old. The humanists launched an effort to win elite public opinion, a progaganda campaign for the *studia humanitatis*. The humanists stressed the ideology, i.e., the purpose and promise of humanistic studies in the world. Possibly the educator who promised the most, who proclaimed the ideology of a humanistic education for the active life in the strongest terms, was Guarino Guarini of Verona (1374-1460). In letter after letter, Guarino told parents, princes, students, and old boys that they would become virtuous, eloquent, learned, and successful leaders of society if they gave themselves to humanistic studies.[7]

The letters pedagogical treatises of the humanists offered a bright vision and rosy promise of the benefits from an education in the *studia humanitatis*. But they were distressingly vague about the actual curriculum that was to replace the old medieval curriculum. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that they men-

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6 See the preface to Book 2 of his *Elegantiae* as found in Eugenio Garin ed., *Prosatori latini del Quattrocento* (Milan and Naples, 1952), pp. 602-03 (Latin with Italian translation). Many other humanists condemned the medieval *auctores*.

7 For an example, see Guarino's letter of 19 September 1419 to his friend Gian Nicola Salerno, the *podestà* of Bologna, in which he tells the latter how humanistic studies had prepared him to meet the challenge of his duties including putting down a recent civil disorder. See Garin ed., *Il pensiero pedagogico*, pp. 326-29, for the Latin text and Italian translation.

tioned too many authors and books. Often these letters and pedagogical treatises turned into extended essays in which the author displayed his own knowledge of the classical corpus. Which of this long list of authors and books would become the new classroom authors?

A slightly earlier discovery of a classical text provided the key. Coluccio Salutati instituted the search that uncovered Cicero's *Epistulae ad familiares* in 1392 in Vercelli.[8] Cicero's *Letters to his Friends* became the centerpiece of the *studia humanitatis*. Cicero's letters became the basic rhetoric text, the one that served as a model for prose composition.

Guarino inserted Cicero's epistles into his school at an early stage of his humanistic teaching. In April or May 1419, when Guarino initiated his independent school in Verona, his prolusion (inaugural lecture) went as follows.

> "In the same manner, for the first libations of studies to be consumed in these years, I have chosen not difficult orations nor bitter topics of this art, but rather a certain easy and very clear way of speaking which, enticing the reader, may be useful and delightful by its very agreeable order of words and gentle weight of the sentences. I have gathered together some letters of Cicero in which this style of

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8 The story of the discoveries of classical texts is still best followed in Remigio Sabbadini, *Storia e critica di testi latini* (Catania, 1914).

pure and very elegant speech is expressed."[9]

Indeed, Guarino compiled an anthology of fifty of Cicero's letters and made the *Epistulae ad familiares* a fundamental part of his lower division instruction. The term *Epistulae ad familiares* as a collective title for a large group of Cicero's letters to diverse correspondents came into existence in the first two decades of the fifteenth century and entered common usage about 1430. Possibly the new terminology reflected the introduction of the letters into the school curriculum.

Italian boys attending Renaissance Latin schools learned to write like Cicero.[10] Cicero became the most important text in humanistic schools. For, as Curtius says, there must be a standard of style, a canon of works that serves as the model for literature and becomes part of the unchanging curriculum.[11] Cicero's prose, especially the letters, became canonical in Italian Renaissance schools. Students learned to write like Cicero, and Ciceronianism became an unchanging standard. Eventually it became such a severe and rigid standard, and its

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9 "Eodem modo ad prima studiorum delibamenta his annis propinanda non difficillimas orationes non asperos artificii locos sed facile quoddam et planissimum dicendi genus delegi, quod suavissimo verborum ordine et leni sententiarum pondere lectorem alliciens prosit atque iuvent. Nonnullas enim decerpsi Ciceronis epistulas, in quibus ille puri et facetissimi sermonis stilus exprimitur ...." Sabbadini, *Storia e critica di testi latini*, pp. 32, 52-59, quote on p. 58.

10 Grendler, *Schooling*, ch. 9, deals with this in detail.

11 Curtius, *European Literature*, ch. 14, esp. pp. 247-48, 259.

proponents so filled with pedantic excesses, that Erasmus found Italian Ciceronianism an easy target for his barbed scorn.

As time passed, the curriculum of the *studia humanitatis* became fixed. The students began with an elementary Latin grammar followed by the *Disticha Catonis*. The students then read the classics: Vergil's *Aeneid*, Cicero's *Epistulae ad familiares*, and Terence. Other authors, such as Horace, and Caesar and Valerius Maximus for history, held secondary positions in the curriculum.

Thus, between about 1400 and 1420, Guarino and others rejected medieval *auctores* and subjects in favor of humanistic studies. They developed a new curriculum. They next had to make the change in the classrooms of Italy. It was one thing to proclaim the texts of the *studia humanitatis*, it was another to insert them into the classroom. Unless humanistic studies could win in the classroom, the Renaissance of the fifteenth century risked failure and disappearance like that of the Renaissance of the twelfth century. When and how did the changeover occur in the classroom?

A handful of pedagogical pioneers won the support of a few political leaders who sponsored their schools in a small region of northern Italy. Sons of the powerful and wealthy attended these schools; soon other parents and teachers embraced the humanistic curriculum. The initial phase of the institutionalization of humanistic studies took place about 1420. The diffusion of the humanistic curriculum to other areas in northern and north-central Italy took about thirty years more.

Guarino of Verona and Vittorino da Feltre were the key figures. I am sure that this audience recognizes their importance and knows generally the contours of their careers. Hence, I will not dwell on them. But I would like to underline their pedagogical influence. Guarino taught the sons of the powerful and wealthy in Venice, Verona, and Ferrara from 1414 until his death in 1460, a long, fruitful career.

His pedagogical career had a number of telling moments whose significance transcended Guarino. For example, in May 1420 the Commune of Verona honored Guarino with a lucrative appointment. It appointed him "to lecture in rhetoric, to teach the *Epistles* and *Orations* of Cicero, and other means that lead to eloquence, as well as other authors that are pleasing to the listeners and useful to all the adolescents and adults of the city and district of Verona...."[12] The appointment was for five years at the very high salary (for a schoolteacher) of 150 gold ducats annually. Guarino might continue to teach private pupils as well. If one needs a symbolic date for the institutionalization of the *studia humanitatis* in the schools, this is it. The leading citizens through the city council appointed a famous humanistic pedagogue to teach Cicero at substantial public expense. In later years

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12 "... elligerit Rhetoricam legere, Epistolas et Orationes Tullianas et alias facultates que ad elloquentiam pertineant docere et alia que fuerint auditoribus placita et utillia omnibus adolescentibus et maioribus civitatis et districtus Verone istiusmodi doctrinam capere volentibus...." The commune's notice of appointment as quoted in Garin ed., *Il pensiero pedagogico*, p. 486.

Guarino moved to Ferrara where he also had great public visibility as tutor to the future prince and as university lecturer. In similar fashion, Vittorino da Feltre taught at the court school of Mantua between 1423 and 1446. He attracted many important pupils from beyond the city's walls.

Guarino and Vittorino, with the financial support of princes and city councils, trained the sons of the ruling class and future humanists. Before long their pupil spread the *studia humanitatis* across northern Italy. These princely, noble, and wealthy commoner graduates were convinced of the importance of giving their sons (and, to a lesser degree, their daughters) an education based on the orators, poets, and historians of ancient Rome and Greece. When these old boys reached positions of power, they had the authority to choose private tutors and communal masters. Naturally, they chose former classmates, or other pupils of the famous pedagogue, on the latter's recommendation. This second phase of the institutionalization of humanistic education by the pupils of Guarino and Vittorino was especially visible in the 1440s and 1450s, and in northern Italian towns within the spheres of influence of Guarino and Vittorino.

Numerous fifteenth-century humanists held elementary- and secondary-school teaching posts. The most ambitious men did not remain in these minor posts. They went on to become university professors, chancery secretaries, advisers to princes, and Roman curial officials. Others were less gifted or not so brazenly ambitious. Men who published little or lacked the good fortune

to win the favor of the powerful remained in the elementary and secondary schools. These humble schoolmasters consolidated the triumph of the *studia humanitatis.*

The career of one pupil of Vittorino illustrated the spread of humanistic education. Ognibene Bonisoli (or Omnibonus Leonicenus) was born c. 1110 in the tiny village of Lonigo, which is about fifteen miles south of Vicenza. He moved to Mantua as a child where he studied with Vittorino da Feltre for about ten years from about 1423 to about 1433. He may have been one of the indigent pupils supported and taught for free by Vittorino. After his schooling, Ognibene began to teach as an independent master in 1536 when he was about twenty-six. He won a communal mastership at the relatively young age of about thirty when the Commune of Treviso appointed him in January 1441 "to teach grammar and read rhetoric, and whichever authors the students require" (*Grammaticam docere, legereque Rectoricam, ac quoscunque auctores requisierant audientes*).[13]

Ognibene was a popular teacher. In 1443 he accepted a communal mastership at Vicenza. In 1449 Duke Ludovico Gonzaga invited him to come to Mantua to tutor his eldest son and to assume leadership of the court school formerly led by Vittorino da Feltre who had died. Ognibene accepted. In 1453 Ognibene

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13 Augusto Serena, *La cultura umanistica a Treviso nel secolo decimoquinto* (Venice, 1912), pp. 68-72, 142, 327-330, quote on p. 68. Also see G. Ballistreri, "Bonisoli, Ognibene," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 12, (Rome, 1970), pp. 234-236; and Vincenza Sansonetti, "Le pubbliche scuole in Vicenza durante il medio evo e l'umanesimo," *Aevum*, 26 (1952), 171-174.

returned to his post as communal master of Vicenza where he remained until his death in 1474, winning the affection of his students for his benevolence and pedagogical skill. Ognibene was also an editor, commentator, and translator of the ancient historians, orators, and poets. And he wrote a Latin grammar. Not an original scholar, Ognibene nevertheless substantially furthered the development of humanistic studies with his teaching and his editing. His scholarship did not break new ground, but made ancient texts more accessible to other teachers and students.

Ognibene's life typified the intellectual and social means by which humanistic education spread. In Vittorino's school he acquired a mastery of his subject and rubbed shoulders with the political and social elite of northern Italy. He then taught for nearly forty years. Ognibene did not forsake teaching for a court or chancery position; indeed, he declined more than one such invitation. Nevertheless, as a master he encouraged humanistic studies. In the ways that influence and prestige operate, Ognibene, like Guarino and Vittorino before him, aided the advancement of humanistic studies and teachers.

We can trace the change from medieval to Renaissance education in the *condotte* (contracts) between city governments and teachers where the records survive. The *condotte* were the signposts of the institutionalization of humanistic education. They showed that city officials and parents, the people who paid the bills, endorsed humanistic studies. The *condotte* began to

display new terminology; teachers were hired to teach the orators, poets, and historians, or grammar, rhetoric, and poetry. Occasionally, especially at the end of the fifteenth century, the *condotte* specified exactly which ancient authors and books were to be taught. Medieval terminology---*auctores*, *ars dictaminis*, dialectic, speculative grammar, *Doctrinale*, Boethius---disappeared from the *condotte*.

For example, in 1371 the city of Lucca wished to appoint a certain Antonio da Volterra to teach Latin. The commune described his accomplishments as follows (here paraphrased): he has a doctorate in grammar and logic, is an excellent "authorist," and is expert in philosophy. (*Et alias habuit in commissione de conducendo pro lucano cumuni* (sic) *unum peritissimum virum qui doctoratus est in Bonomia in grammaticalibus et logicalibus, auctoristam optimum et in philosophia peritum et aliis facultatibus.*).[14] The combination of grammar, logic, philosophy, and *auctores*, i.e., the medieval curriculum authors that we have mentioned, denoted a medieval school.

The Luccan schools changed by the middle of the fifteenth century. In 1453 the commune offered a post as communal master to Giovanni Pietro Vitali d'Avenza (c. 1400-57). The terms of the appointment indicated the change: the commune wanted him to come to Lucca to teach "oratorical arts, poetry, and letters' (*in*

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14 Document printed in Paolo Barsanti, *Il pubblico insegnamento in Lucca dal secolo xiv alla fine del secolo xviii* (Lucca, 1905; rpt. Bologna 1980), p. 212.

magistrum artis oratorie, poesis et literarum).[15] Vitali, who already held a humanistic teaching post in Venice, turned them down. The persistent Luccans renewed the invitation in 1456 with the appointment now described as "rhetoric and oratorical art, poetry, and Greek and Latin letters" (*rhetoricam et artem oratoriam, poesim et licteras grecas atque latinas*).[16] Vitali accepted this time, but died in 1457, before he could have made much of an impact.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the terminology of the *condotte* clearly indicated that the Latin schools of many, probably most, north Italian towns had become humanistic. For example, in 1446 Foligno appointed a communal master to teach "the rules of grammar, poets, historians, and books appropriate to the ability of the pupils" (*in legendo regulas gramaticales, poetas, historiocos et libros convenientes secundum qualitatem auditorum*).[17] The small town of Treviso in the Venetian Dominion in 1449 appointed as communal master one Filippo Da Reggio "to teach grammar to boys and adolescents in the city of Treviso, and to lecture on poetry and rhetoric to all who wish to listen" (*ad*

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15 Document printed in Giovanni Sforza, "Della vita e delle opere di Gio. Pietro d'Avenza, grammatico del secolo xv," in *Atti e memorie delle RR. Deputazioni di Storia Patria per le provincie modenesi e parmensi*, vol. 5 (1870), p. 403.

16 Document printed in Sforza, "Della vita di Gio. Pietro d'Avenza," p. 405.

17 Document quoted in Agostino Zanelli, "Maestri di grammatica in Foligno durante il secolo XV," *L'Umbria*, nn. 13 and 14 (1899), p. 103.

docendum grammaticam pueros et adolescentes in Civitate Tarvisii et legere poesiam et rethoricam omnibus audire volentibus).[18] And in Modena, also in 1459, a teacher bought a house with the money that he had earned "from lecturing and teaching in schools grammar, the poets, rhetoric, and humanistic authors" *(ex exercitio legendi in scolis et docendi gramaticam, poetas, rethoricam et humanitatis auctores*).[19]

Foligno and Treviso were not important towns by any definition in the fifteenth century or at any other time. Modena was a little more important, but scarcely a major center. Yet, by the 1450s, they had humanist masters; at least the language of the *condotte* for their teachers indicated this. If such small and obscure towns adopted the *studia humanitatis* by the 1450s, it is very likely that the majority, possibly a large majority, of northern and north-central Italian towns had humanistic curricula by the middle of the century. It appears that by about 1450, the humanists had won their struggle to transform medieval education. Humanistic studies dominated Latin schools in Italy.

By 1490 or 1500 the humanistic curriculum must have been well-nigh universal in Italian schools. One can find at this time curriculum guidelines issued by communal councils which

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18 Document printed in Serena, *La cultura umanistica a Treviso*, p. 74.

19 Document quoted in Emilio Paolo Vicini, "Le *Letture Pubbliche* in Modena nei secoli xv-xvii," in *Rassegna per la storia della Università di Modena e della cultura superiore modenese*. Fascicule 5 (Modena, 1935), p. 69.

insisted on the full *studia humanitatis*. For example, Lucca in 1499 ordered its communal teachers to teach daily "a grammatical author, an historian, an orator or a book of epistles (i.e., Cicero's letters), a poet, and the rudiments of Greek."[20] Conservative holdouts are difficult to find.

This paper has described the curriculum revolution of fifteenth-century Italy. Humanistic schools began about 1120 in northern Italy, especially in the Veneto, and spread. By the 1450s, the balance had tipped. Probably at this time many more schools in northern and north-central Italy taught the *studia humanitatis* than did not. By 1500 all Latin schools taught humanistic studies. Of course, minor aspects of medieval education continued. Students still read Donatus and the *Distichs* of Cato. But Italians discarded medieval curriculum authors and *ars dictaminis*. Humanistic studies then spread to northern Europe. The "new" classical curriculum lasted for approximately five hundred years.

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20 "uno autore grammatico, uno historico, uno oratore overo uno libro di epistole, uno poeta et li erotimati greci." As printed in Paolo Barsanti, *Il pubblico insegnamento in Lucca*, p. 215.